

Summary of Initiatives

Introduction

Executive Order 19, signed by Governor Timothy M. Kaine on June 16, 2006, directs the Virginia Department of Veterans Services (DVS) to prepare a comprehensive report on the status of state programs and services for veterans. The Order requires DVS and other state agencies to find ways to offer new, expanded or customized services that will meet the educational, health care and social service needs of Virginia's veterans, giving special attention to disabled veterans. In addition, it directs all state agency heads to renew their commitment to giving veterans preference when hiring.

In response to EO 19, DVS, the Board of Veterans Services and the Joint Leadership Council of Veterans Service Organizations submitted legislative proposals for the 2007 session of the General Assembly to the Governor, and DVS presented an interim report to the Governor in fall 2006 detailing the status of veterans services in Virginia (Appendix 2). On May 2, DVS fulfilled the final directive of EO 19 by presenting 28 initiatives that will further improve services and opportunities for Virginia's veterans.

The initiatives presented in the final report are categorized as technology, workforce development, outreach, or quality of life. A summary of each initiative follows.

Technology Initiatives

Internet Portal

DVS proposes creating an Internet portal that will provide descriptions of and links to the federal, state, and local agencies that provide services for veterans as well as to non-profit and private sector service providers. As the state's technology capabilities mature, the portal can be expanded to present a uniform assessment tool which veterans and families can complete online. The assessment tool will identify needs and services for which they qualify, and the information entered by the veteran can be transmitted to the appropriate service providers for follow-up by that agency.

TurboVet

DVS is developing a TurboTax®-type software that will assist both veterans and benefit service representatives in preparing and submitting claims to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Like TurboTax®, TurboVet will use an interactive format to guide the veteran or benefits service representative through a series of questions that will complete the claims application and identify the documentation required to support the claim.

Upgrade DVS Technology Infrastructure

This multi-part initiative includes three components. First, the agency is in the process of consolidating the multiple databases used to store veterans' claims application data. These multiple databases, currently in Microsoft Access, will be consolidated into a single SQL server database. The agency also has a pilot project in process to digitize hard copy documents and correspondence stored in selected benefits service offices. Once digitized, these records will be accessible electronically by any DVS representative. DVS' third technology infrastructure initiative is to employ web-based software to deliver online training to DVS benefits service representatives.

Workforce Development Initiatives

Integrated Workforce Development

DVS recommends creation of a task force to examine how existing workforce development services can be presented to military personnel, veterans, disabled veterans, their spouses and dependents in a centralized manner, and to identify additional services needed to create a comprehensive workforce development initiative for veterans in Virginia.

Awareness Campaign for Employers

An information campaign targeting employers can raise awareness about the benefits of hiring veterans and encourage employers to grant preference to veterans when making hiring decisions. DVS recommends using the Employer Support for the Guard and Reserve 5-Star Employer Program as a model for this campaign and also recommends partnering with the U.S. Department of Labor's *HireVets First* program.

Employment Opportunities for Veterans with Disabilities

DVS recommends that a subcommittee of the task force recommended under the initiative for Integrated Workforce Development collect data on the number of disabled veterans in Virginia seeking employment and explore re-training opportunities for veterans whose disabilities make them ineligible to return to their civilian jobs.

Veterans Hiring Preference in State Government

House Bill 2840 and Senate Bill 1033, passed by the 2007 Virginia General Assembly, strengthen veterans preference in Virginia state government hiring. To support this legislation, DVS recommends creation of a new position in the Department of Human Resource Management to coordinate implementation of the new legislation and to serve as the Commonwealth's lead agent on hiring veterans within state government.

Outreach to Veteran-Owned Businesses and Potential Entrepreneurs

DVS recommends creation of a task force to make recommendations for the systematic identification of veteran-owned businesses and maintenance of a database with statistical and contact information. Additionally, this task force can be directed to conduct research on best practices, such as tax and other incentives, used in other states to cultivate and support veteran-owned businesses. Finally, this task force can make recommendations for initiatives to cultivate and support small veteran-owned businesses in Virginia.

Implement and Review Virginia's Legislation for Service-Disabled, Veteran-Owned Small Businesses (SDVOSBs)

To support Senate Bill 1145 passed by the 2007 Virginia General Assembly, DVS recommends placing a part-time position, preferably filled by a disabled veteran, in the Department of Minority Business Enterprises to assist in implementation of this legislation. The agency also recommends review of the bill's language to determine if it is advantageous to align Virginia's definition of service disability for the purpose of identifying an SDVOSB with the definition used in federal guidelines.

Outreach Initiatives

Increased Advocacy for Veterans

DVS plans to continue its active role in Virginia's legislative process, identifying veterans' issues and facilitating development of solutions by bringing together appropriate decision makers. The agency recommends working with members of the Joint Leadership Council of Veteran Service Organizations (JLC), Board of Veterans Services, and other military-related organizations to annually provide a list of veteran and military-related issues and priorities to the Governor prior to his participation in the National Governors Association Conference. DVS will also provide these issues and priorities to Virginia's Congressional

representatives on a routine basis, and ensure that they are communicated to other states through active participation in the National Association of Directors of State Departments of Veterans Affairs. The agency recommends annually communicating these issues to the Secretary for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

Increased Awareness among State Agencies about Veterans Issues and Services

To raise awareness in state agencies about veterans issues and services, DVS plans distribute brochures and posters to other agencies for display and distribution; create memorandums of understanding with other state agencies that will result in cross-training employees to be able to recommend state agency services to veterans; and to hold symposiums and workshops that will help raise awareness in state agencies about veterans issues and the services available to them.

Symposiums on Veteran-Related Issues

An effective way to raise awareness about veterans issues and to create a continuum of service model and no wrong door philosophy for veterans is by directly involving state agencies and other key players in exploring the issues, identifying resources, and making policy recommendations. This can be done through symposiums that bring decision-makers together in a collaborative setting. Symposiums can center on polytrauma and combat stress injuries, veterans issues impacting state agencies, business assistance topics for veteran-owned small businesses, and workforce development for disabled veterans.

A Dedicated Veterans Medical Resource at the Department of Health

DVS recommends placement of a dedicated medical professional in the Department of Health. This position will be responsible for increasing awareness about health issues specific to veterans in both the general public and within the medical community.

Veterans Awareness Promoted through Virginia's Museums

Virginia's museums offer a viable vehicle for raising awareness about veterans. This can be as simple as asking museums to display a counter-top poster and distribute brochures. However, it can also be much more engaging by capitalizing on the unique expertise of each museum and having them create veteran-related displays based on their areas of expertise, such as art, technology and history.

Automated Comprehensive Direct Mail/Email Program to Virginia Veterans

DVS recommends entering data from the DD214, Report of Separation, which the agency receives from the Department of Defense, into an automated system. This will provide a database which the agency can use to mail letters and postcards to veterans that correspond to life events, such as expiration of their health care benefits and GI Bill benefits. These communications will also provide information about veterans benefits and services provided by the agency.

Veteran Indicator on Virginia-Issued Driver's Licenses and ID Cards

Another way to identify and communicate with veterans is by placing an indicator on Virginia-issued driver's licenses and ID cards that recognizes the holder as a U.S. military veteran. This indicator will be captured on the customer's electronic DMV record. The veteran indicator in the DMV database will allow DVS to access names and addresses of veterans in order to conduct direct mail campaigns about issues relevant to veterans. The veteran indicator will offer an added benefit by providing an easy-to-recognize verification of an individual's status as a veteran, enabling organizations that wish to honor veterans with discounts or other recognition to easily and fairly identify qualified individuals.

Improved Veterans Communications Infrastructure

This three-part initiative recommends centralized access to resources via the Internet, centralized toll-free telephone access to DVS, and annual face-to-face interaction between DVS and the public through a series of town hall meetings.

Quality of Life Initiatives

Continuum of Service Model and No Wrong Door Philosophy

The needs of the veteran and his or her family must be addressed holistically and as a continuum—from immediate and emergency needs for shelter and acute medical care to intermediate needs for rehabilitative medical care, individual and family counseling, and job training, to long-term assistance such as housing loans, maintenance-level therapy and other forms of assistance. With a no-wrong-door approach, no matter where the veteran first touches state government, he or she will be evaluated in terms of the continuum of service model and assisted with obtaining needed services from other state agencies.

Task Force to Study Best Practices in Other States and Make Recommendations for Virginia

Best practices in the provision of benefits and services for veterans are emerging across the country. DVS' goal is for Virginia to become a leader in the provision of services to veterans. DVS recommends establishing a broad-based task force to examine innovations across the country. The agency proposes partnerships with one or more universities to conduct the required veteran-specific research and analyses.

Provision of Behavioral Health Care Services by State Resources

DVS is working with the U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs to expand and expedite health care services in Virginia through implementation of the Federal Veterans Benefits, Health Care, and Information Technology Act (S.3421) enacted in December 2006. DVS has entered into discussions with the USDVA, the Virginia Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse Services and the Virginia Association of Community Services Boards (CSBs) to develop an on-going contractual relationship for referral of veterans to the CSB services system for treatment of mental health and substance abuse disorders.

Implementation of the Heroes to Hometowns Program in Virginia

DVS recommends exploring with the American Legion and the National Guard how Virginia can fully participate in Heroes to Hometowns (H2H) program. This exploration will include examining H2H and similar programs in other states, developing partnerships among state agencies and veteran service organizations, and identifying roles and responsibilities to ensure that Virginia mobilizes its communities to execute the components of the H2H program.

VCU Veterans Center

Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) proposes developing a Veterans Center that will provide life skills training, employment training and job opportunities, and training for mental health professionals about veteran-specific issues and treatment strategies. Additionally, the center will conduct research and host conferences on veteran-related issues.

Service Delivery to Incarcerated, Homeless, and Hospitalized Veterans

DVS proposes establishing an outreach and education program for the inmates of Virginia's 40 major correctional facilities and field units. The agency proposes partnering with the Prison Re-entry Coordinator for Richmond Goodwill Industries to provide veteran-specific information as part of this program. The agency also recommends developing a partnership with the Virginia Inter Agency Council on Homelessness, Virginia's Homeless Continuums of Care, the USDVA, and Virginia's veterans service organizations to develop a new, integrated model for serving Virginia's homeless veterans. The agency recommends development of a similar approach for providing outreach and education for hospitalized veterans.

Operation Greenscape

DVS and the Virginia Department of Forestry are exploring ways to enrich the landscaping at the Virginia Veterans Cemetery in Amelia, the Albert G. Horton, Jr. Memorial Cemetery in Suffolk, and the SitterBarfoot Care Center in Richmond. Under consideration are enhancement of nature trails in the cemeteries and landscaping around the catch-basis at the SitterBarfoot Veterans Care Center.

Veteran-Specific Hunting/Fishing Programs

The Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (DGIF) has proposed several exciting initiatives that will offer new, expanded, or customized services to veterans. DVS believes these programs will be especially well received, given that many veterans are avid hunters and fishermen. Some initiatives proposed by DGIF require further research and discussion to determine feasibility, costs, and benefits, while other initiatives can be pursued within current resource levels.

Real Estate Tax Exemption for Veterans with 100 Percent Disability Rating

Given the relatively small number of Virginia veterans with a 100 percent service-connected disability rating—6,401—DVS recommends that the Code of Virginia be amended to provide a real estate tax exemption for these veterans, regardless of income or financial worth.

Veteran-Specific Research

Accurate and in-depth research is essential to ensure the efficacy of Virginia's programs and services for veterans and to ensure that programs are achieving the objectives for which they were designed. DVS recommends that the task forces recommended in this report identify the most pressing needs for research and that DVS contract with universities throughout the state to conduct the research.

To read the full version of the EO 19 report, visit www.virginiaforveterans.com and click reports and publications.